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In the right mirror: we are all gods

Aaron Koehn

Virginia Commonwealth University

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In the right mirror: we are all gods

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Aaron Koehn
BA, Augsburg College, 2006

Director: Hilary Wilder
Associate Professor of Painting and Printmaking

Virginia Commonwealth University
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Table of Content:

Abstract.....	iii
Weather or not.....	4
Holding Hands.....	16
Icon.....	23
Return of the Jedi.....	36
Arrival.....	39
Water Bill.....	46
Conclusion.....	51

Abstract

IN THE RIGHT MIRROR: WE ARE ALL GODS

By Aaron Koehn, MFA.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Major Director: Hilary Wilder, Associate Professor of Painting and Printmaking

I look to the common and mundane as sources for inspiration and imagination. In an attempt to evolve a veneer away from representing a coveted material, I have taken phenomenological events from my own personal experience and have searched for commonalities with them to create a new idea for veneering. My exploratory use of Google as a grammar-less machine deciphers the very nature of naming and its ambiguous attachment to an image. I am interested in the multiplicity of personal associations that become attached to images, and the subjectivity thus involved in the naming of an image.

What happens when a veneer—a thin, decorative surface covering—no longer emulates a raw material like wood or stone but instead becomes invested with its own meaning? This meaning might range from the phenomenology of weather events to the psychology of personal experience. In a series of sculptural image-objects all entitled *sad rainy day water on window* (#'s 1 - 5), I explored this proposition by coating windows with digital photographs culled from Google images searches that related to emotional and mood-altering personal experiences.

Historically, the purpose of veneering was to mimic the material qualities of a highly valued resource, primarily to conserve that resource. This was done by shaving or sawing extremely thin layers of wood, stone, metal or ivory that was then used to encase a less venerated material. The veneer acted as a mask, concealing the identity of the mundane materials that lay underneath it. This identity relates to the idea of cultural overlay, placing value and importance on a material's socially constructed significance as opposed to its utility.

I am intrigued by everyday things that—like veneers—are mundane in their materiality but can contain highly poetic resonances. Another example of this is the ordinary do-it-yourself window system, an affordable, utilitarian object that is thus highly democratic. Through everyday use, this simple window can also become imbued with personal narratives, memories, and emotions, thereby accumulating psychological value in much the same way a precious metal carries intangible economic value. My attempt in the following three-dimensional images, titled

sad rainy day water on window, was to permanently overlay found images representing my own psychologically-charged phenomenological image-memories onto the surfaces of different windows. This was done to permanently capture a meaningful but transient moment of my life in the surface of an object. Rather than using a coating of laminate imitating the veins of Carrera marble or the luster of gold in the manner of a traditional veneer, I used a coating of imagery representing melancholic emotions I felt during a powerful rainstorm. I understand that objects can become defined beyond their physicality by the events and memories associated with them. I believe that these many associations can become permanently embedded in an object as personal narratives by its owner.

Last summer, while working at my studio in midtown Cleveland, the weather rapidly shifted from a beautiful sunny day to chilling darkness. As the wind forcefully blew, rain began to fall heavily, dampening and masking all the usual sounds heard on an ordinary day. Chaotic ambience from the wind and rain hastily filled my quiet work space. The sunlight that enters my large windows no longer acted as my room's source of illumination. As the rain came showering down on my roof and through holes in my windows, I could do nothing but watch, listen and observe; its sound and darkness had enveloped all of me. I walked towards the windows and observed the blurred city skyline. What were once windows now became abstracted screens that changed my ability to recognize space. Upon closer examination, the view from my window was rendered illegible, but each water droplet on the window became a small parabolic lens, reflecting the interior of my studio. Inside the water droplet I could see a reflection of a solitary figure: my own. In this moment, I felt deeply alone and had an inherent yearning to share this

experience with someone else. This longing to share profound moments in time with another individual are always embedded in the ethos of my work.

Just ten minutes before this phenomenological happening, I understood my windows as just windows, but they had been transformed into something else, and me along with them. With the clouds in the sky opening up, this experience ended, and began to exist only in my mind as a vivid memory. In *sad rainy day water on window* (#'s 1 - 5), I attached an image to store-bought windows in order to evoke this memory and to share the feelings I experienced on that rainy day with other people.

In the past, when I had a question I would ask my parents for the answer. If they could not point me in the right direction, or if it was a question I did not feel comfortable asking, I would seek out someone else. The bulk of my questions today are addressed to Google, which has become a ritualized forum for my philosophical inquiry. My sense of the ambiguity and uncertainty of emotions makes me question the value of experiential knowledge in relationship to the quest for abstract empirical truth. Out of curiosity, and based on the sensations that had been felt during the rainstorm, I reduced my emotional experience to the bare minimum of words: sad rainy day water on window. As a sort of experiment, I plugged these words into a Google search in the hopes of gathering interpretive images for the text that I had distilled from emotional experience. I was attempting to capture a collective emotion that “we” all feel represented through an image. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes: “I say we for politeness’ sake. In the past, alteration, change, any becoming at all, were taken as proof of mere

appearance, as an indication that there must be something which led us astray.” My use of “we,” is upheld by a stern belief in us.

Google has no requirements for the form in which I ask a question. It is not concerned with formative language or grammar; it presupposes and codifies the radical dissolution of language and is thus concerned only with the individual word. Google operates by liberating words from their grammatical constraints, allowing them to migrate in any possible direction. The trajectory of this migration is the truth of an individual word as it is displayed by Google. And the sum of all these trajectories is the truth of language as a whole, the truth of language that has lost its grammatical power over words. Grammar is the means by which language has traditionally created hierarchy among its words. And this hierarchy has informed and even determined the way in which the traditional philosophical questioning of knowledge and truth has functioned.¹ Google logarithmically personalizes truth based on user data. Truth in this instance refers to the true meaning of individual words liberated from their subjection to grammar.

Google matches language to an image by using all textual associations that are connected to an image. Google does not decipher the words used to name or describe an image; it automatically links image and word together. Google does not impose a hierarchy on textual associations. Instead, we indirectly place a hierarchy on these textual associations based on their relevance to our browsing record. An image’s textual associations can come from many possible

¹ Groys, Boris. Google: Words beyond Grammar. 100 Notes - 100 Thoughts. DOCUMENTA (13) no. 046 HATJE CANTZ. 2012

sources, such as an original file name, but it does not necessarily correlate to a specific title for the image. For instance, the file name can be an embedded source code from the camera or device which took the image (revealing the type of flash drive or hard drive that the image was uploaded with), it can be named by the initial user or creator of an image for one's own archival purposes (perhaps in a post-editing state one might name the file to differentiate and categorize a particular manipulated file from the original or others similar to it), it can also be named to quantify a very specific meaning through a hashtag or individualized titling based on one's personal overlaid associations. My interest is piqued by the personal associations attached to an image, and the subjectivity involved with naming it.

In *sad rainy day water on window #1* and *#2*, I used repurposed factory-made windows as objects for overlaying imagery. I chose windows that were second hand, found at the Cleveland, Ohio, Habitat for Humanity: Re-Store, a place I visit quite frequently. Covered in smudged fingerprints, residues of paint, remnants of stickers celebrating honor students, the found windows were laced with the illegible story of its previous caretaker. Because they were once looked through by a previous owner, *sad rainy day water on window #1* and *#2* were fabricated in a quasi-body sized frame, elevating them off the ground. I wanted the viewer to confront these objects face-to-face as opposed to the other windows in this series that sit on the floor or lean against a wall. The other windows were bought at local hardware stores and were selected for their economically low value and breadth of utility. For example, *sad rainy day water on window #3* and *#5* use a window system that contains plastic blinds. This object is a dust free bolt-on window attachment which eliminates the need to dust one's household blinds.



sad rainy day water on window #1, direct-to-substrate print on window, wood. 2013



sad rainy day water on window #2, direct-to-substrate print on window, wood. 2013

It acts as a vacuous chamber, not allowing the dust of daily life to occupy its surface. The plastic structure that frames these windows is stamped with a texture that mimics the grain of wood. Finally, *sad rainy day water on window #4*, uses a small glass block ventilation window chosen from my own experience with and admiration for the semi-transparency of a glass block wall.

In the series *sad rainy day water on window*, I sought to encase sculptural readymade windows with appropriated imagery found on Google. The veneering images of atmospheric raindrops relate to a window's utilitarian function. Each printed raindrop reflects the interior space from where the appropriated photo was taken. I am connecting anyone who visits *sad rainy day water on window* to the anonymous person who originally took the photograph. The viewers of *sad rainy day water on window #1* and *#2* are also connected to the person or family whose windows I have reused. I wanted the printed imagery to evoke an emotional response in viewers similar to the feelings of isolation and alienation that I experienced during a rainstorm. I sought to alleviate my own sense of aloneness by sharing these melancholic experiences with others. Since the images I used were found through the search terms "sad rainy day water on window," they were either collectively deemed "sad" by Google or specifically titled "sad" by those who had viewed or uploaded them. I wanted to find solidarity through these Google searches, and, in turn, I wanted this specific, yet collective, emotion of sadness to be addressed in the ethos of my sculptures and resonate with viewers.



sad rainy day water on window #3, direct-to-substrate print on window with built-in plastic blinds, wood. 2013



sad rainy day water on window #5, direct-to-substrate print on window with built-in plastic blinds, wood. 2013

Through these image-based sculptures, I am attempting to connect people and emotive phenomena. I view these sculptures as portals, allowing for one to see through the window's semitransparent glass. The glass panes are reflective, mirroring both the viewer and the gallery's interior space. By seeing their reflection in the window and the image, the viewer becomes momentarily captured in the work's form. Through this state of encapsulation, I hope to produce a pure heightened state of sadness for each viewer.

Certain rules were imposed in the selection of imagery: the image file size had to correlate to its printability on a large scale, raindrops in the image had to parabolically reflect the interior from which the photo was taken, and the image had to be generic, somewhat relatable to all. With these limitations set, the majority of images selected were found to be sold as background desktop screen savers, implying that the computer screen can indeed be viewed as just another window into the world. In my research, I found images intended to be computer desktop wallpapers and screen-savers to be assigned more emotive text than any personal photo uploaded to the web because of their product branding. By coating an object with a state of its own function (or intended function), the image on the object becomes the object itself.



sad rainy day water on window #4, direct-to-substrate print on glass block window vent. 2013

I have come to conceptualize time spent shopping for groceries, clothing, household amenities, and studio supplies as sculptural exercises; amassing materials with the idea of things to form a new (mental) object. This exercise helps me make sense of what I encounter on a daily basis. I believe things found in stores have layers of meaning formed from their functional use and from their branding. *Target© brands*, for instance, uses scenarios of images stumbled upon on the internet and objects found in places where I go shopping, to make a new meaning association with their imagery. Through copywriting, things found in stores have—in addition to their implied associative meaning—a forced associative meaning. The forced associative meaning constructed by the copy is meant to persuade someone to buy something, or to influence his or her beliefs. The copywriter is responsible for telling the story, crafting it in such a way that it resonates with the reader and viewer, ideally producing an emotional response. This, of course, does not mean all things are bought for their emotional value, some might be chosen for their utility, but emotional value remains an indispensable piece of the capitalist puzzle. For people to have an emotional response to a product, they must project themselves into a future scenario with what they are being sold. In this way, inert objects become highly emotionalized portals wearing both the veneer of their material factory make-up, and another immaterial layer of psychological attachments encouraged by the product's branding.

In *Target© brands* I obscure a readymade image which comes pre-inserted in RE Target© Photo Frames by overlaying my own image found from my experience in dating, primarily through online sites such as Tinder and OkCupid. The pre-inserted image in the Target frame depicts an idealization of a contemporary couple. The image offers specific gender dynamics as the man in the photo guides his female partner in making a blended smoothie. The man's chiseled arms seem to be in a state of post-embrace as the woman excitedly views the fruits of their labor. The interior space of the image is clean and white, insinuating the showroom-like quality of this couple's living arrangements.

The overlaying images that I put on these frames are screen shots of beachscape sunsets, a template motif in most online dating account profiles. The overlay image offers the possibility of projecting oneself into the picture, just as I projected myself into the picture while attempting to connect with someone online. Both the RE Target© Photo Frame and the found image demand the insertion of oneself as a consumer and possible future partner. On a website, the text is available as an optional descriptive means to craft a user's identity; however, the primary shaper of one's identity in the sphere of online dating is undoubtedly the profile image. A quick look through the majority of logarithmically matched partners reveals certain trends and styles within the type of photographs uploaded. I correlate the profile picture found on dating sites to the factory-inserted image, selling the idea of a future self, enveloped in the arms of my other.

At first glance, the three frames look extremely ordinary and familiar. They are situated together on an IKEA© RIBBA™ shelf, leaning against the wall. I want *Target© brands* to



Target© brands #1, direct-to-substrate print on RE Room Essentials™ Photo Frames. 2014



Target© brands #2, direct-to-substrate print on RE Room Essentials™ Photo Frames. 2014



Target© brands #3, direct-to-substrate print on RE Room Essentials™ Photo Frames. 2014

resemble other framed portraiture that might be found in a home or place of business. The current site for *Target© brands* #1,2 and 3 is a locked office space. In the context of their current installation site, *Target© brands* do not stand out or demand the viewer's attention. I consider *Target© brands* to be trompe l'oeil objects, imitating photo booth and studio portraiture found in the office or home. *Target© brands* mimic photographs of one's family or loved ones; they are to be looked at differently than other painting and sculpture present at an exhibition. Their familiarity evokes a voyeuristic intrigue, passive fascination and perhaps a sentiment of care—something like the sensation accompanied by seeing a fellow colleague and their loved ones documented in a family photo.

The works can only be viewed by looking through floor-to-ceiling glass windows; from this distance they appear to be ordinary elements in the room. I am using this temporarily unoccupied space as a show room, much like the studio set *Target©* used to document the couple whose photograph was inserted into the frames used in *Target© brands*. I use the office, the furniture arranged within it and *Target© brands* to create continuity between all the objects perceived in the room: an unusable telephone, two guest chairs with their price tags still zip-tied to their legs, a desk with nothing on it accompanied by a pulled-out desk chair, and three small photos situated on a thin shelf. These objects are traditionally intended to connect people by physical means; however, in this installation they remain behind glass and can only be perceived by looking.



Installation View: *Target© brands* (#s 1 - 3), direct-to-substrate print on RE Room Essentials™ Photo Frames. 2014

When gazing into the office from the outside, I imaginatively place my body—and each viewer to follow suit—as a sitter in the vacant desk chair that is invitingly pulled out from underneath the desk. *Target© brands* was created from my yearning to connect with somebody else through a computer. I wanted everything that comprised this office space to carry an emotionally-charged urge – similar to my attempts to connect with someone on the other side of the computer screen. I compare the idea of a profile picture (created by a user) with the branding of a product (created by a corporation). Both approaches to image-making depend on the construction of a fictional narrative. This story or expectation masks the unknowable reality of either the product or the person that lies underneath. My fascination with such narratives springs from my uneasiness with my own pathetic empathy with both products and profile pictures.

Icon

Housed in a neighboring conference room and possessing similar formal and conceptual attributes to *Target© brands*, a series of eight *Walmart© Icons* were hung on the walls; the doors were locked and another fictitious stage was set. For this situation, I was curious about the capacity of an image-based representation to become a stand-in for an object. I am obsessed with the relationships between an object, its representation as an image, and its actual utilitarian use. In *Walmart© Icons* I chose products that have what I see to be an excessive description that elevates their utilitarian function. The following excerpts are examples of this and have been taken from item descriptions found on Walmart.com©. For example: “a parachute intended to be

worn while running which builds endurance and physical strength while slowing one down;” “a subwoofer that can both produce low-pitched audio frequencies known as bass, but can also palpitate one’s heart in a feeling that is similar to falling in love or heartbreak;” “a cologne that can be worn to disguise or mask our bodies’ naturally produced scent, an odor that transmits olfactory messages to our brain which subconsciously tell us if a partner’s immunities are compatible to our own;” “water that promotes refreshing dreams;” “an elongated toilet seat which always appears to be clean;” “an LED light bulb that can be synced to your smartphone to change your mood;” “a gazebo screen kit that, when properly installed, can turn your outdoor structure into an instant oasis by offering unobtrusive protection from birds and insects;” finally, “a pair of headphones that when used properly have been known to deliver the same emotion and power the artist originally intended to produce in their music.” I am interested in products that are described and branded by such absurd language, as the terminologies used idealize the products described. *Walmart© Icons* use the idealization of a product through its whimsical description, to create a mental image of artifacts that are not physically present.

In *Walmart© Icons*, I created eight packages to house eight products found on Walmart’s website. These products are: a PER4M™ Parachute; a subwoofer from BOSS™ audio; Chrome™ cologne by Azzaro©; a twenty four-pack of DREAM WATER™; an elongated oak-veneered toilet seat; a color-changing LED light bulb; a screen covering kit for a gazebo; and a pair of Beats™ headphones by Dr. Dre. These items, described fully online, create a fantastic story for their intended use. These hilarious descriptions contextualize a perfect use of the object in a sincere and sellable way. In Beats™ by Dr. Dre, these headphones are for “those who take



WalMart Icons (Beats™ by Dr. Dre), direct-to-substrate print on RIBBA Frame™, shopping cart screen capture. 2014

sound seriously. They're the headphones that artists like Will.i.am use in the studio and are designed to deliver the same level of emotion and power the artist originally intended." The possibility of a pair of headphones to powerfully deliver the intent of an artist is an unquestionable fallacy. However, the possibility of perfectly delivering an artist's intent is a real construct in my mind. I intend for my packages to do the same for their viewers, asking him/her to imagine the feasibility of these things to exist. Another product I selected was DREAM WATER™, and it has similar hyperbolic branding as Beats™ by Dr. Dre. DREAM WATER™ is a "sleep aid, free of questionable chemicals, that contains no drugs and has zero calories." The possibility for a shot of water, "that helps you get a restful night's sleep, so that you wake up feeling refreshed," is a very attractive proposition. I know these statements are fictitious in nature, however, the idea of them is remarkable.

Walmart© Icons are clean and colorful. They have aesthetic qualities that resemble attractive packaging found in Apple products, or other high-end merchandise. Contradictorily, they are products that are somewhat cheap and knowingly dumb. When one looks at *Walmart© Icons*, they are confronted by an image that veneers the glass and the surrounding support structure of a white frame. This overlaying image encases the object and obscures the inserted printout. Banner advertisements, like those found on any search engine, are also present in the inserted image, guiding the viewer to other related products. In *Walmart© Icon (DREAM WATER™)*, the overlay image is of splashing blue liquid that surrounds the object's front facade, pouring out of the frame and into the minds of the viewer. The inserted image is riddled with



WalMart Icons (DREAM WATER™), direct-to-substrate print on RIBBA Frame™, shopping cart screen capture. 2014

supplement facts, links to other vitamins and a banner advertisement for the World's first anti-aging light therapy mask. All of these intertwining signs in DREAM WATER™ shape one's idea for what DREAM WATER™ could really be. I invite viewers to literally look through the image of an object to read its descriptive text.

As mentioned above, these texts are filled with whimsy and idealization, creating an imagined fantasy of the chosen product's use. In totality, *Walmart© Icons* exist as stand-ins for a product. Knowing that these products can never live up to their stated intentions, I sought to create my own packages for them. I wanted to communicate the idea of a product, without the artifact present. I consider *Walmart© Icons* to be framed packages, as they contain attributes similar to the actual products sold. I created these packages to project the merchandise's described intentions directly into the minds of the viewers. Printed screen shots from my online shopping cart were placed inside of RIBBA™ frames from IKEA©. These frames were then custom modified to float-frame the inserted imagery. Float-framing attributes three dimensional qualities to a picture on paper; it is also the normative procedure in framing contemporary works on paper. I hoped for these three-dimensional qualities to transmute physical substance to the viewer's idea of the depicted object.

Although I do not trust the objects being sold, I do have faith in my imaginative use of them. In my mind, there is a certain truth in the poetry of the idea of their use: water that promotes nice dreams, a speaker that makes one feel like they are in love, headphones that deliver an artist's intent. The "idea" for these things can exist and does manifest itself in my

mind. I invite the imaginative viewer to manifest these impossible objects in his/her mind as well. Similarly to the aforementioned *Target© brands*, *Walmart© Icons* currently exist in a locked conference room. Representational images of *Walmart© Icons* also exist online dispersed as image-packages on a variety of file hosting sites. I embedded *Walmart© Icons* with the same source codes and hashtags that Walmart© uses for implementation of their products on the web. Every time one searches online for these products, my image-packages will circulate, and be recreated as a thought in our minds. By doing so, I am extending the life and the possibilities for the products found in *Walmart© Icons* to be visualized by a broader viewership than just an art audience. The representational images of *Walmart© Icons* were intended to guide our imaginations to make visible that which is accessible only in the realm of emotion, and not in the aisles of Walmart©.



WalMart Icons (Boss™ subwoofer), direct-to-substrate print on RIBBA Frame™, shopping cart screen capture. 2014



WalMart Icons (Azzaro™ cologne), direct-to-substrate print on RIBBA Frame™, shopping cart screen capture. 2014



WalMart Icons (toilet seat), direct-to-substrate print on RIBBA Frame™, shopping cart screen capture. 2014



WalMart Icons (gazebo), direct-to-substrate print on RIBBA Frame™, shopping cart screen capture. 2014



WalMart Icons (PER4M™ parachute), direct-to-substrate print on RIBBA Frame™, shopping cart screen capture. 2014



WalMart Icons (LED light), direct-to-substrate print on RIBBA Frame™, shopping cart screen capture. 2014

On April 25th, 2014 at 814-816 W. Broad Street in Richmond, Virginia, in an old passenger train depot, a newly constructed elevator brought passengers up and down floors of the two-story building in a perfect synchronization to the most widely recognized piece of music that was never recorded. *The Audience is listening* was a 28.5 second rendition of George Lucas's musical THX[™] introduction, debuting before his 1983 film *Return of the Jedi*, the first movie to be played in a THX[™] certified movie theater. James A. Moorer, an employee of Lucasfilm's Computer Division, was asked to create a sound that, "comes out of nowhere and gets really, really big." Moorer wrote a "score" that consisted of 20,000 lines of computer code, which then randomly spit out a new sound every time the program was run. The one they chose had a conspicuous descending tone that everybody liked.

THX[™] engineers later developed a baseline set of standards which address theater shortcomings that might negatively affect an audience's enjoyment of a film. Outside noise from the lobby or other auditoriums, inside noise from the projector or air conditioning, audio distortion, obstructed or uncomfortable viewing angles, reverberation in the auditorium, insufficiently bright images, and unequalized or poor audio were all problems the THX[™] team sought to fix. There are currently more than 3000 THX[™] certified theaters throughout the world, all of which are in contractual agreement to renovate or construct theaters to the specifications of the THX[™] design team. Additionally, all audio and visual equipment must be leased as well as the right to use it by THX[™].

For *The Audience is listening*, I wanted to create a short-lived, yet fantastic experience for anyone curious enough to ride an elevator up or down the two-story building. This experience had to use blatantly recognizable elements in its construction, leaving no room for ambiguities or open-ended questions. The THX™ introduction is the most widely recognized piece of digital music and a variation of it plays before almost every blockbuster movie in theaters. The sound demands and promotes attention, its frequencies, which sound loud, actually resonate throughout the whole body and not just the ears. When one hears the THX™ introduction before a movie—and as used in my audio installation—it becomes a phenomenological experience and a sign designating that the entertainment is about to begin.

The Audience is listening demands the attention of audience members present at an art opening. For me, an art opening has become more a place for social gathering than a chance to experience discrete artworks. I sought to change this aspect of the art opening by silencing the audience. For 28.5 seconds, the audience became immersed in the sounds of an ascending or descending digital tone. For almost 30 seconds, the audience members were held captive to my installation; they literally could not leave. This audio installation made a spectacle out of traveling in an elevator, and set the stage for one's experience of the many other art objects presented at a gallery opening. Something as simple and banal as a journey in an elevator became a heightened experience. In all of my work, I try to elevate mundane objects by investing them with intensified emotion. These things excite me, as it has always been my aim

to raise the status and bring attention to the everyday. I wanted this half-minute experiential journey to transform all those who used the elevator.

I altered the physical dynamics of the audience's bodies, as their ascending and descending travels were perfectly looped with the enthralling THX™ tone. Because the “deep note” fills the body, I hoped for participants to fixate on somatic change from the audio clip, rather than focusing on being transported through space. The audio begins quietly, and, as time progresses, it gets louder and louder. As the audio track builds and multiplies itself, the listener might become frightened as if this sound will continue to multiply ad-infinity. The audio ascension peaks at the specific moment when the listener can no longer handle its rising strength. The maximal note is only perceived as dangerous: its decibel output poses no real danger to one's eardrums. Perceived danger adds to experience and makes it attractive for a participant to ride the elevator multiple times.

An actor was hired to operate the elevator and cue a provided mp3 device with the elevator's travel. The actor was given basic directions: to unobtrusively invite audience members into the elevator; to declare the audio installation was titled, “the audience is listening by Aaron Koehn;” and to perfectly sync the closing of the elevator door to the THX™ audio track. Each time, the work is made anew, as the hired actor's casual interactions with the audience change with every departure.

The Audience is listening was cadenced with the opening and closing of the elevator's door. When the door began to open, the elevator's internal digital bell sounded. I mastered my audio track to slowly fade out, ending at the exact moment the elevator's facsimile-bell chimed. Blending these two digitally made audio samples as one stepped through the threshold was crucial; as it connected the experience just created with the rest of the gallery's space and included artworks. *The Audience is listening* was performed from 5-8pm by a hired actor, using an iPhone 4S connected via bluetooth to a beatbox portable™ by Dr. Dre.

Arrival

Most of my personal experiences with works of art have involved computer monitors or projectors. My work will inevitably live on in the same manner. I have absorbed the bulk of art history through in the form of the flattened representation of the three-dimensional art object, stripped of its physical presence. The physical identity of a work of art has been determined by the form of the image, forcing me to deduce my own sense of its physicality. For example, before seeing Matthias Weischer's *Zimmer*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, California, I had seen representational images of the painting in books and through the computer screen. Weischer was someone I studied closely during my highly informative painting education, taking any opportunity I could to see his works documented in books and online. Weischer uses domestic interiors devoid of inhabitants as his subject matter, creating spatial illusions in oil on canvas. In photographic documentation, these illusions read as flat planes of color, receding into his canvas through highly attentive gradients. When I first came across

Zimmer, at MOCA in Los Angeles, its physical presence took me aback. Weischer built the seemingly flat image from extremely thick impastoed paint applications. Each layer applied built up a relief surface, likening it more to a sculpture than a painting. Residue from Weischer's brush was never seen in viewing *Zimmer*, through its representational imagery, nor other dimensional surface variations present. My notion of its physical identity completely transformed; this work of art had taken on new meaning for me, beyond any meaning it might have had as seen through representational imagery.

Representational images for works of art have certain qualities which I have adopted as fabrication elements in my own work: the flattening of space and surface, the erasure of site specificity and context, the adjustment of an image's white balance to reflect the backlit LED computer monitor used to view artworks and other images on a daily basis, new trends in gallery lighting (specifically the trending use of 4100K T5 fluorescent lamps by most museums and galleries of contemporary art), and a blemish-free surface without the presence of human hands. Understanding and absorbing these depiction qualities, I seek to invest them in the physical objects that I make. A photograph is literally a trace of something brought before the lens, it is the recording of light or other electromagnetic radiation, either chemically by means of a light-sensitive material such as a photographic film, or electronically by means of an image sensor.² A vector graphic, however, is a mathematical expression made by the same rectangular cells that comprise a computer's display. This is of utmost importance to the ethos of my work, as I make physically tangible a logarithmic coding whose sole intention is to be communicated through a

² Spencer, D A. *The Focal Dictionary of Photographic Technologies*. Focal Press. p. 454. 1973

monitor, projector or printer. I want to make physically visible that which is only seen in the space of a computer or on a flat surface. My pursuit is to hybridize image and object by reworking qualities specific to each in the context of the digital space.

I am deeply invested in the image file and its name, as they are both key factors in my finding the right image to begin an artwork. A digital image is nothing in itself. It only becomes visible (and thus only exists) through use and propagation, when one image-viewing device communicates it to another. A work of digital art is placed within a network other than a manual or optical space, and highlights the network itself. Thus, the model of the singular work of art has been superseded by the model of the communicative network, an unseen space that is created by links of mediation and communication among apparatuses.³ Not only is there a lack of physicality to an image file (.jpg or .tiff), the image file exists unseen to our eyes in a logarithmic source code, until it is opened for viewing.

In the pursuit of images that contain distilled and universally relatable emotional resonance, I hope to create abstract paintings from blatantly recognizable imagery. There are images that—owing to their omnipresence—begin to act as icons and verge on abstraction. In creating *Airplane Window* (#'s 1 - 12), browsing through stock photo websites, I located the most generic symbol for the notion of flight that I could find. The downloaded image is part vector file and part image file, comprised of both a captured photo and an image made solely on the computer. Although at a distance, its shape and form might resemble many things, upon closer

³Groys, Boris. *Art Power: Art in the Age of Digitalization*. MIT Press, 2008



airplane window #7, UV cured ink on panel, melamine. 2014 (1 of 12)

examination it can only ever be just that, an airplane window. I wanted this highly familiar image to function as a transporative device for the viewer. The individual windows of the series *Airplane Window* (#'s 1 - 12) confront anyone standing in front of them to compare-by-recollection their experiences with being in the cabin of an airplane to their current experience of being in a gallery. For me, the windows in an airplane are a point of personal fixation while flying. Their oval shape and low recess into the wall strike me as monolithic entities. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: a space odyssey*, presents a similar notion with the director's use of the abstract rectangular monolith – an object that when met with, embodies all mystery and inspires awe in its viewers. Airplane windows are also highly unnerving, as they are fragile barriers separating the inside of a plane from the frigidity of the environment. I wanted these windows to evoke the feelings of being in a small-pressurized chamber, with only a small abstracted view out onto the world. With *Airplane Window* (#'s 1 - 12), I hoped to inject this alienated sensation of flying alone high over the Earth into the gallery setting.

The series *Airplane Window* (#'s 1 - 12) engages the idea of seriality and the possibility of reproducing an experience in multiple. For their installation, *Airplane Window* (#'s 1 - 12) were serially fixed to the wall at the same height. I allowed for the site's architecture to dictate the linear distance between each panel and the next. Some of the windows were forced into close proximity to architectural obstructions within the gallery. Every window has a view; however, not all seats will be desirable. I would like to literally connect their installation to the seating arrangement in an airplane, lending hierarchical value to one's relative location in the gallery



Installation View: *airplane window* (#'s 7 - 10), UV cured ink on panel, melamine. 2014

space. Some of the windows got lost in existing signage on the gallery walls, such as the map of a fire escape route or a sign for the women's bathroom.

The images that represent the airplane windows and the molded plastic that surrounds them are crisp and exact. The center of the windows were left stark white, emphasizing traces of my underlying gessoed brushwork. This brushed white acrylic polymer offered the only differential qualities between the twelve objects. I chose to leave the inner window blank, in a desire to open the possibility to a viewer's projected landscape. This white absence, depicted in all *Airplane Windows* (#'s 1 - 12), became highly transportive. The white offered no view of a recognizable landscape or ocean. They did not depict feelings of flying above the weather – a

place where it is always a sunny day or clear night. The white windows resembled flying through a disorienting cloud, confusing one's location and his/her trajectory in space. As objects of fixation one focuses on while traveling, endlessly changing as one flies through space, my airplane windows propel one in a similar manner, but in the context of a gallery. *Airplane Windows* become relics of past memories, ever present in their physicality but distant as they are imaginative pictures of recalling. Their blank white interiors become screens for the viewer to recall his/her own imagination as a landscape. *Airplane Windows* activate the viewer's body within the gallery space, but propels his/her mind into a distant white world.

Similar in conception to *airplane window #1-12*, *Swimming pool* and *Hot Tub with DREAM WATER™* also seek to make abstract paintings out of highly recognizable imagery found on the internet. Dealing with the everyday, both a swimming pool and a hot tub are social objects that for me have embedded memories reaching back to my youth. At the end of long and hot summer seasons, I specifically remember being fascinated by the monolithic form of an emptied swimming pool. The voided tub's abjectness and depletion were just as memorable as the splashes made in the chlorinated water.

In Jeremiah S. Chechik's 1989 Christmas comedy film, *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, suburban father Clark Griswold played by actor Chevy Chase has an extravagant dream. This recurring vision remains hidden from his family as he attempts to manifest its existence by any means possible. Even zeroing out his family's bank account will not stop Clark from carrying out his fantasy: buying the family a swimming pool. In his visions, Clark sees his entire family coming together out of fellowship and love in a late summer pool party. He also fantasizes about a beautiful lingerie clerk met while "buying his wife underwear," flicking her red bathing suit at Clark in an invitation to join in a skinny dip. These visualizations are figments of Clark's imagination, but cinema has allowed for these musings to be made visual. They reveal an imaginative projection of one's self in the future; in Clark's case, his dream of having a swimming pool is made real by it being visualized.

Although steeped in comedy, Chevy Chase's character exhibits in a memorable way the idea of self being imagined in the future (an idea running through the core of my work). Similarly, *Swimming pool* was created in reference to the memories of my childhood and early-teenage desires that I projected onto the image of a swimming pool. My focus is not placed on owning something like this, it's filled with the ideal of family and friends coming together in a beautifully set backyard. In my mind, the image of a swimming pool flickers between being mundane and being spectacular, depending on who is in it. The stock photo used oscillates between being a grand statement of amusement and class and being a complete banality. Its large format as an image and painting is profound, yet a swimming pool of that size is not. This humorous dialogue between image and object is further humored by the scale of *Swimming pool*; if physically realized can only inhabit one person. The grandeur of blowing up the size of a recognizable image is negated by the image's actuality as pool. I turned *Swimming pool* on its side; its vector-formed-water (computer generated) finds level at half way point. My intent was not for this image-object to read as half full or half empty. I hoped for the calming blue water to read as actual water would read if a pool were to be turned on its side.

In *Hot Tub with DREAM WATER™*, I appropriated imagery found at a local spa and bath dealership's website, and printed it directly onto a canvas. The surface of this canvas was built up in thick layers, and sanded down to a buffed finish surface. For this three-dimensional image, I sought to emulate the aforementioned surface qualities characterizing my viewing of art works from a distance through a computer monitor. The attempt to create a blemish-free surface has

always been an aim of mine, but I accept its failure as an element of my ambition. While making *Hot Tub with DREAM WATER™*, although originally intended for two, it seemingly became a bath for one as the translation from image to object skewed its proportions. My objective was to make an object of social therapeutic gathering, but through its creation, it had become a spa of loneliness.

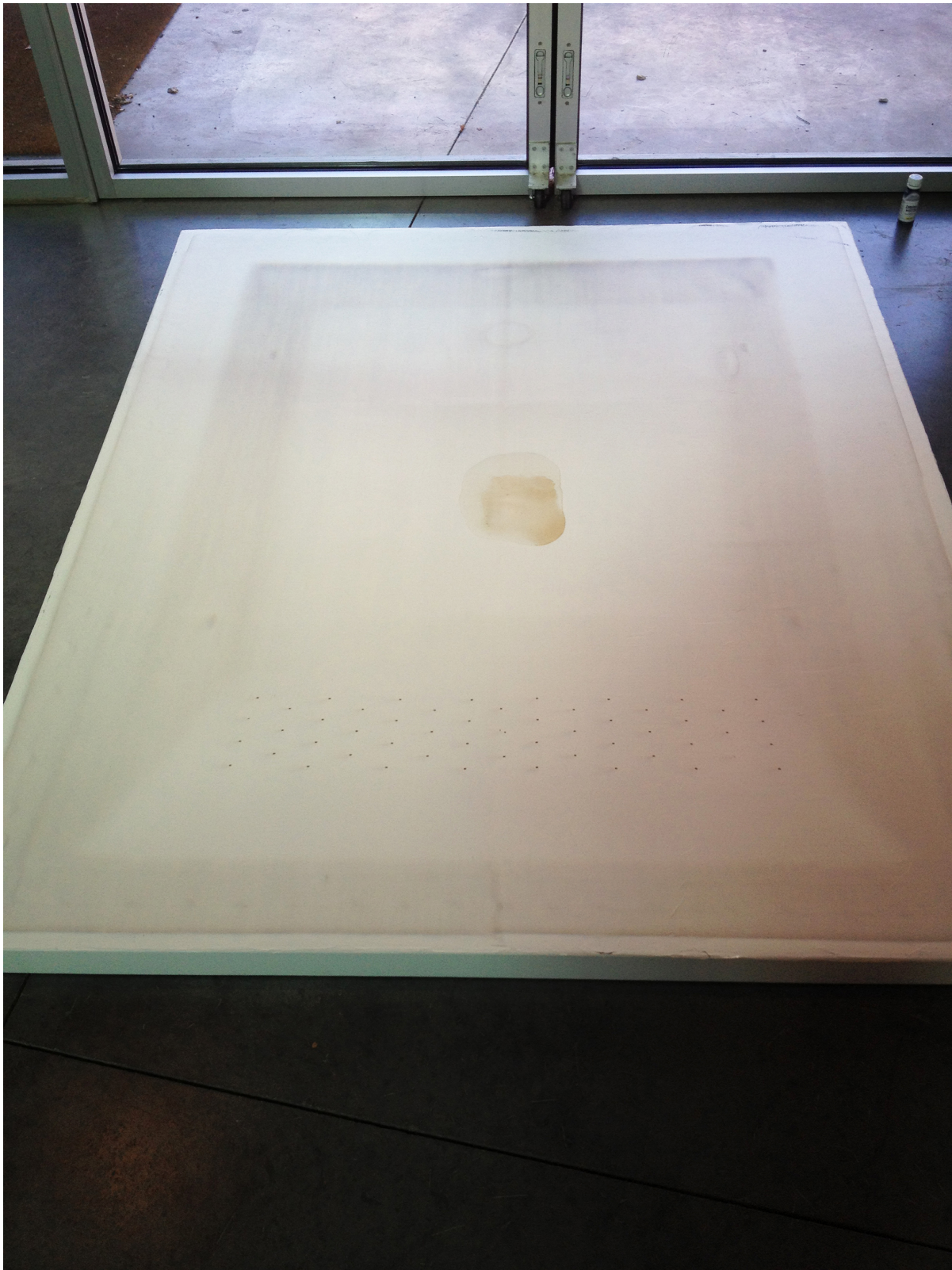
Looking for ways to interact with this bath, DREAM WATER™, a recurring material in my work, became my elixir of engagement. For its installation, I laid *Hot Tub with DREAM WATER™* flat on the floor, installed in a manner very similar to the positioning of the real thing. Every week I would come to the hot tub and pour a single serving of DREAM WATER™ onto the canvas in the area where the drain was printed. Each week, my dreams would slowly evaporate, but would be rejuvenated the following seven days with the next dosage. When dry, the residue of DREAM WATER™ that was poured onto the image of a drain, resembles the iron-rust remains of evaporated water from a vacant bath. I invite all who go to *Hot Tub with DREAM WATER™* to metaphorically take a dose of its concoction and soothingly drift off in to a dream-like state of relaxation.



Swimming pool, UV cured ink on canvas. 2014



Hot Tub with DREAM WATER, UV cured ink on canvas. 2013



Hot Tub with DREAM WATER, UV cured ink on canvas. 2013

Conclusion

In conclusion, my work is rooted in the everyday. I look to the common and mundane as sources for inspiration and imagination. The ordinary things of this world provide creative narratives to what they are as objects. I use these narratives to imaginatively form new ideas about what they can be as ideas in the mind. In an attempt to evolve a veneer away from representing a coveted material, I have taken phenomenological events from my own personal experience and have searched for commonalities with them to create a new idea for veneering. Although still a commodity and simulated skin, my three-dimensional images transact shared emotions, based on a new currency of experience. This insinuates a hierarchy placed on the phenomenological, rather than to a coveted resource.

My exploratory use of Google as a grammar-less machine deciphers the very nature of naming and its ambiguous attachment to an image. I am interested in the multiplicity of personal associations that become attached to images, and the subjectivity thus involved in the naming of an image. I seek to find camaraderie in the subjective nature of an image's title, while then using these images as a veneer on relating objects, such as rain on a window. I have explored the commonalities between the use of the profile picture found on internet dating sites and highly branded objects found while shopping. To connect with someone on the internet, I have navigated through the veneer of a profile image, much like finding my way through imagery used by corporations like Target. The use of imagery as a branded icon, insinuates how an object like a frame should be used. My interest in copywriting and branding is to create my own narratives by allowing the imaginative viewer to create his/her own meaning associations with an object or

image. By printing in a sculptural manner, I give three-dimensional relief-like qualities to what normally is depicted as flat, making physical entities out of imagery that are topologically specific to the computer. By doing so, I am making seen that which only resides in a computer as a logarithmic code, undecipherable to the human eye. The works created have a monolithic presence that embodies abstraction and proliferate the unknown.